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16 Part VI/Friday, May 18, 1984 J — Los Angeles Times

A LOOK AT FOUND AND UNSEEN PHOTOS

Continued from Page I

garbage that still holds, dried and ancient, to the prints. As metaphors for the detritus of a soul-stealing, high-tech society, Rice's finds stand alone well enough. But in his careful arrangements of their torn tackiness, they begin to haunt us quite artfully.

Just who are these people, these families, these ciphers, mapped so frivolously by their peers? An odd blend of mystery and banality pervades. This dressed-up couple is obviously going out for the evening, but are they married or on a first date? Is this snapshot of a hefty young girl in a see-through negligee a shy attempt at pornography, or just a pajama-party memory? Is that half-dressed young man on the lawn alive or dead or what? Some photos seem strategically torn to exclude certain figures—why? The ordinary people of the '50s, '60s, and '70s are made strange and extraordinary.

There's no denying this transformational side of Rice's art, but there's also no denying the strong voyeuristic instinct that draws us into these photos. It makes monkeys of us when we peer with Peeping-Tom curiosity at the accidental, out-of-focus shots of limbs or empty space, or the unexplainable, damaged exposures, all of which take on an abstract artiness in this gallery context.

"The Unseen Photographs" inspire no such confrontation with our base curiosities, but because they are an almost random selection of previously unexhibited shots from the Photography Gallery's inventory, there's a comparable dynamic at work. One seeks out a thematic thread in these photos that might bind them and reveal some truth about the art form.

Instead, we're faced with the penchants and mysteries of photographers' visions, all in the context of art that, for whatever reason, was never deemed fit for display in previous shows. In their way, then, these back-room rediscoveries of work by a range of well-known and rising artists are also "found photographs."

Interestingly, two of them are by the same Richard Peterson whose studio/gallery houses the Boyd Rice show. Like some of the unintentionally abstract shots in Rice's display, Peterson's calculated black-and-whites are blurry and surreal in depicting domestic images. Mounted in Sydney Kovak's metal-sculpture frames, they have a way of exalting and making strange the everyday.

Once you've seen Rice's display, it's hard not to relate it to the "Unseen" photos. Not unlike the wasted shots of a snapshooter, Ricky Horian's "Portrait of a Conversation" series focuses on vacated objects—a playground slide, or a row of chairs—that seem charged by the absence of people who were only recently present.

Mark Cohen's black-and-white shots of a young girl are active, seemingly sloppy, with body parts cropped out. And Carlos Richardson's photo of a nude young woman hunched atop a car engine would seem to be very private stuff.

What sets these images apart from Rice's found photos, of course, is the apparent craft and artist's eye that makes them perfectly self-expressive. But they convey a certain innocence of subject and form that relates them to amateur photography and makes them lyrical the way naive art can be.

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By contrast, most of the other "Unseen Photographs" are utterly sophisticated and self-consciously arty: Olivia Parker's sensual shots of feathers, crystals, eggshells; Richard Misrach's photo of a Stonehenge ruin illuminated to resemble some alien monolith, or Elizabeth Zeldon's breathtaking image of a woman's elegant back as she gazes on high sea cliffs in a rosy dusk. High craft is the thread uniting them.

Ultimately, both the "Found" and "Unseen" shows amount to the sort of modern mosaics that hold out some compelling comfort. These accumulated images take on the personal force of momenta, memories, dreams and imaginings in our modern lives. They assure us that photography belongs to every eye and sensibility—but most of all to the eye of the beholder.

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